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Learning a lesson in Dimock

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In May of 2010, The Daily Star sent former reporter Tom Grace and photographer Brit Worgan to Dimock, a rural town of about 1,400 people in northern Pennsylvania.

We wanted to see the effects the pursuit of natural gas had on the lives of residents in drill-happy Pennsylvania before the heavy equipment invaded our part of the huge Marcellus shale territory.

While there was little doubt that some in the small village benefited financially from the visitors and business generated by the drilling practice known as horizontal hydrofracturing _ or fracking _ what our story and photos revealed was beyond disturbing.

There was so much methane in Dimock that some folks could turn on the faucet and light their water on fire.

Grace spoke to Dimock resident Norma Fiorentino, whose two water wells on her 2.9 acres couldn't produce drinkable water anymore. Then, on New Year's Day in 2009, one of her wells exploded.

"I was at my daughter's for dinner," she said. "Lucky thing I wasn't here."

A gas well drilled by Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. just off her property had leaked methane, which contaminated the ground water and migrated into her well, she said.

Pennsylvania has found that at least 18 residential water wells have been polluted.

Cabot had been forced by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to deliver drinking water to Dimock residents until several weeks ago, when the EPA gave it permission to stop.

The citizens of Dimock were understandably concerned about whether they would have clean water for drinking, bathing, doing their dishes, washing their clothes and flushing their toilets.

The EPA promised to send a tanker truck filled with water, then reneged.